

Chapter Seven -- "To Learn Their Grammerie".

The first thing I can really remember about school is the time Father killed the old dominecker rooster.

I was about four then, and we were living on Mud Lick Creek. It must have been either in late spring or early fall, or it wouldn't have mattered much whether the rooster was in the garden or not.

If you haven't ever tried to have chickens and a garden at the same time you can't possibly imagine what a pest a rooster can be. The pesky things can fly nearly like a buzzard when they're allowed to run loose the way they did in Kentucky. And even when they're too fat for much flying, it's hard to keep them from getting through a paling fence, which was all we had around the garden. A poor man can split his own palings, but chicken wire costs money.

Hens are bad enough, especially in the spring, when they wallow in the loose dirt in the garden, and kill the young plants or eat the seeds. But a rooster is worse, for he'll find a way in and then go "chook-chook-chook" till he calls in all the hens, too.

I can still remember that rooster, though I hadn't had much to do with the chickens since I tried to pick up a little biddie the spring before, and got a bad flogging from the old hen that had hatched the little fellow.

Maybe I'd better explain that word "dominecker". It's one of a group of terms to describe mixed colors, and it always re-

minds me of what Bob Hodges said when some fellows were arguin' whether it was the hair or the eyes that really told whether a girl was a blonde or a brunette. (It's really the skin, by the way.)

"I figure it's this way," Bob drawled. "The ones with light eyes an' light hair are blondes, an' the ones with dark hair an' dark eyes are brunettes. The rest are brindles an' domineckers."

"Brindle" is the word for a cow-beast of any kind that has two or more colors of hair, not in spots, but all mixed in together. There's the red brindle, red and white; the blue brindle, which is really a sort of blue-gray and white; the brown brindle, brown and white, and the shit brindle, if you'll excuse the term, which is of red or brown, and black hair, mixed. About the color of a brindled bull dog.

In horse-beasts the term is "roan", which is also sometimes used instead of "brindle" for a cow-beast that has red and white hair. There's the red roan, bay with some white mixture; the strawberry roan, famous in at least one cowboy song, has the same colors, but mostly white. Once in a while there's a blue roan in horses, but mostly the ones with black and white hair are called iron grays, or just gray. They get grayer with age, just like men, till they're finally just about white, which gives rise to the old saying that "a gray mule never dies." Dad used to say sometimes of some old man who was holding his age unusually well -- especially if he wasn't much account: "He won't ever die. He'll live a hundred years and turn into a gray mule."

A dominecker chicken is a sort of gray, something like a barred rock, if you know what they're like. But it usually has a

little yellow around the throat, too. I can't get excited about modern chicken farms, with all the hens the same color. It was lots more fun with the old "barnyard breed", where you might see nearly any color. Every chicken was different, and you had them all named, mostly by colors, though Walter once had a rooster named "Rob", short for "Robinson", because he crew so! Of course we always named one of the black hens "Hickety Pickety", from the Mother Goose rhyme, especially if she was a good layer.

The old dominecker rooster at Mad Lick never had any other name, so far as I can remember. He was a big, swaggering fellow, with a good deal of yellow on his neck and a yellow cast in the white of his feathers. But he met his match when he tempted Father by getting in the garden and staying there.

A chicken is like a goat. He'll get into a field, and when you try to chase him out he'll run towards anything but the hole where he got in or the gate you've opened. But if you hit him with something you'll find out right then that he remembers how to get out of the field.

I suppose that's why Father threw pretty hard at the rooster, though I don't think he expected to hit him. He used to be a pitcher, and could throw hard, but never had good control. But when you got him mad he threw hard and straight as a bullet, as he should have remembered from the time he killed the rabbit.

That was while we were living at Blaine town, and he started across the pasture to his mother's house one snowy day, and saw a rabbit sitting in a ditch. He went on over to the house and borrowed Uncle Joe's pistol, which was the only gun in shootin' shape just then.

He went back to the ditch and there was the rabbit. So he took a shot at it, and didn't even come close enough to scare it.

Then Father had just one shell left in the gun, so he drew a careful bead with both hands, and just cut a notch in the rabbit's ear, he found out afterwards. The rabbit jumped up and ran right across in front of him. That made Father so mad he threw the pistol at it, and killed it graveyard dead. Everybody thought it was a good joke but Uncle Joe, who went around for a while with his under lip stuck out, because it had broken the handle of the gun when Father threw it.

Well, Father had chased the old dominecker rooster till he was out of breath and good and mad, and when he cut down with a rock it hit the chicken in the head, and old dominecker started flopping his last flops. There wasn't anything to do but go ahead and eat him, and I remember Walter and Shirley took the two drumsticks to school in their lunches.

That was the year Father and Miss Mamie Ochshire were teaching the school at Mud Lick, and I was getting old enough to pay attention to some of the stories that Walter and Shirley brought home.

One was of what happened when Miss Ochshire asked Walter the capital of Pennsylvania. He wasn't sure, so he said: "Might it be Philadelphia?"

"It might be, but it ain't," she said.

"Give her some sass, some apple sass," whispered one of the Picklesimer boys, but Walter knew better. Don't ask me what a name like Picklesimer was doing back in the mountains. I don't

know, but there they were, and you'll find some of 'em there yet. There were three boys nicknamed Bug, an' Frog an' Man-eater, an' to this day I don't remember what their real names were.

I never have been able to understand why city people are so much surprised to learn that there are schools in the mountains, the same as anywhere else. Just because people in Eastern Kentucky were often poor, it didn't mean they were illiterate, too.

Even my grandparents, I'm sure, understood the feeling of the woman in the old ballad who

-- had children three,

And she sent them away to the North Country

To learn their grammerie.

Though they may not have approved of her sending her young'uns to be taught by the Yankees.

The mountains were still pretty thinly settled when Grandma and Grandpa Stafford were born around 1850, an' there weren't many schools close to them. Blaine Creek was pretty well settled a good long time before that, an' grandpa Swetnam, who was born in 1814, had a pretty good education. But George Ann Turner got some schoolin' an' if Jesse Stafford hadn't been to school more than a year when she married him, it was partly because he'd been left an orphan. He made it up later though, an' after he started runnin' a store he made the drummers teach him how to work fractions an' percentage. You couldn't beat him out of a nickel on a trade, though he never was much for readin' books, except the Bible.

Mother's Great-Grandma Pelphry, who must have been born nearly back to 1800, used to tell her about the schools, which in her day must have been pretty funny. But I guess the ones in a good deal of the country were, then. These were the days of the "blab schools", when all the students had to study out loud, so the teacher would know they weren't into anything they shouldn't be.

They did part of their teachin' in songs, too, an' Mother used to sing us some verses of the multiplication table set to music, an' a geography song that went:

North America, seven million;
 Population, twenty-five million;
 Face of the globe, two hundred million;
 One fourth land and three fourths water.

The tunes were right cute. But the teacher must not have known very much. One of the pupils got hold of some kind of a geography and took it to school, but he couldn't make that out.

"George Raphy!" he snorted, handing back the book. "I don't know anything about your Mr. George Raphy."

But by the time Father and Mother came along after the Civil War, schools taught a good deal, even if they did just run about four months a year. Maybe they didn't teach anything but the three R's, but they taught them. I know Father and Mother learned a lot more arithmetic than I ever did, including some surveying, and allegation medial and alternate, which is beyond the reach of anyone I can call to mind just now, except some mathematics professors, and Father had learned the multiplication table up to

twenty-five times twenty-five, though I only learned it up to twelve times twelve, and my children are just getting it up to ten times ten.

Father and Mother could parse anything in print, and give you the rule from Rigdon's Grammar. And I've heard them say Grandma Stafford, who lived to be over a hundred, could in her day spell any word in the old blue-back speller, including eleemosynary.

I got a shock just after I'd finished college, when Father and I were riding along one day with a distant cousin, who hadn't ever been to anything but the old grade schools of before 1890.

We came to a bridge where somebody had put up a sign: "Reader, where will thou spend eternity?" and Father asked me what was wrong with it. I knew it ought to be "wilt", but I was flounderin' around when the old cousin snapped out: "If a pronoun in exalted diction is the subject of a verb, the verb also should be in exalted diction."

People often ask why mountaineers talk the way we do, an' especially why we may say "an'" for "and", or say "goin'" for "going". About all I can say is that we don't see any need to stand on ceremony, and we say things the way they sound best at the time.

That's true of a lot of things we say that wouldn't sound good in town, but do in the mountains. We're used to 'em, an' they sound natural, an' why should we get so all-fired stiff about it, anyway?

On the other hand, there are a lot of things we never can

understand about the way outsiders write about what the way we talk.

For instance, any time you pick up a book about mountaineers, quoting what we say, you'll find the common word for whiskey spelled "licker". Now, I've heard that word all over the country, an' it always sounds the same. When a college professor says "liquor" it sounds just as much like "licker" as when a mountaineer says it. But what makes the man who puts it in print so sure the mountaineer would spell it wrong? The same thing goes for "says". It sounds the same everywhere, but when a mountaineer says it, the book feels it has to be spelled "sez." And women, "wimmen".

Another thing I never could understand is the hard time people from outside the South have understanding "you-all", which is pronounced "y'awl". It's simply the result of a sort of distrust of the plurality of "you", which, after all, hadn't been in use very long as a plural when the South was first settled, if I recall correctly.

Since it seems to give so much trouble, and I don't know of any place that it's ever been very carefully explained, I'd just as well put it in here.

First, it's used as a plural to show that you're including a whole group. You say: "Won't y'all stop in for dinner?" so as to be polite and make it clear you don't mean just one.

Second, it's used in speaking to one person to refer to his whole family, clan or connection. You meet John Smith and say: "How are y'all?" That includes his wife and children, and maybe his cousin Effie.

Third, and this is the hard one: You say y'all to one person to be very polite. You say it to a judge, or a parson, or an elderly person, or anyone where you want to be especially polite. I don't know why anyone who ever studied French or German should misunderstand it, but we get popular songs saying: "I love you-all", which is formal style, and about like saying: "I love you, Miss Poindexter." Nobody would say that except a child to her teacher, maybe.

Yes, we had schools in the mountains, and one of the verses of "Leather Britches", runs:

My father sent me down to school;
 Leather britches an' a flop-eared mule.
 I lit on a stump when the jinnie shied,
 But leather britches saved my hide.

One thing I never did understand, though. Back when I was a little feller, once in a while some older boy, out of school, would pass by an' yell: "School butter!" Then he'd run like hell, for every boy in school would take out after him to give him a beatin'. It was something that never did fail. But I never could find anybody that knew what "school butter" meant, or why it made us want to fight.